

Star Wars

Wizard's RPG Stories

source : <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=starwars/newsarchive>
upload : 10.IV.2006

Professionals at Work

By August and Cynthia Hahn

In a rancid cantina on Cularin, the Cerean bounty hunter and assassin Sai-Ani Kannu meets with a mysterious Human about contracts on the lives on heroes in the system. But Sai -- as jaded and weary of killing as he is -- is shocked by the details of the job. Learn more in our latest supplement to the Living Force campaign.

It may be a dark time for the people of Cularin, but even in the shadow of a galactic war, citizens have a need for relaxation. This need drives several thriving industries in the Cularin system: taverns, sports, and entertainment. Nowhere do these disparate businesses meet more readily than in the "Thriller's Row" cantinas and clubs of lower Hedrett. With more than twenty different drinking establishments, night clubs, and private arenas for all manner of games on a single narrow street, Thriller's Row has made a name for itself as a place where folks of any species or walk of life can come for a good time -- no matter how they might define the term...

"So as I was saying, we find this dead Rodian in the alley. Looks like a professional hit to me. I turn to my partner and say, 'Lookit that, Fealo, someone's thrown away a perfectly good greenskin!' Ain't that a riot, pal?"

The Human beside him had been talking in this manner for some time now, completely oblivious to his attempts to make the smelly man go away. Pretending to be deaf had not worked. Buying the unkempt Human a series of drinks in the hope he would pass out from inebriation had only served to keep him here. And while thoughts of punching him in the throat and watching him choke on his own shattered esophagus were amusing, it would probably have unfortunate legal consequences.

In the end, that left Sai-Ani Kannu sitting at the bar in a detestable dive known as Crater's. He certainly would not have gone there by choice, but the hovel was the selected meeting place for his contact, and he was oathbound to stay there until the meeting took place.

That meant sitting right there, in the chair he had been requested to occupy, for as long as it took for his contact to arrive. Apparently, that also meant enduring the seemingly endless stories of a disaffected OPS officer and his Human dramas. The tale from a few minutes back -- the one in which he called the Office of Peace and Security's forensics team the "Dead Jedi Clean-Up Squad" -- had been particularly appalling.

Sai looked down into his drink for the fortieth time. On the sole instance when he had been forced to slay a Jedi in the course of his work, the Cerean had not been proud of his action, nor did he wish to repeat the

experience. The Jedi had simply been doing his duty, and while the death had been regrettable, it had also been unavoidable. There was no reason to take joy in the victory, and Sai felt no reason to denigrate the fallen Knight or the Jedi Order. Besides, he still bore the jagged burn scar from his opponent's energy sword to show for his battle; once was quite enough.

Of course, like any skilled fighter, Sai was both intrigued and disturbed by the idea of any attack or attackers capable of defeating so many Jedi in so short a time. At last count, there were more than a dozen dead on Cularin; at least three had been fully trained Knights of the nearby Almas academy.

Sai was deep in thought when the comm unit on his wrist vibrated silently. One pulse. Then two. Then one again. That was the signal; the meeting was on. He followed protocol by finishing his drink, paying the barkeep a huge fee for his part in setting up and hosting the rendezvous, and headed behind a saffron-colored curtain in the corner of the establishment. The smelly Human watched him go, but unfortunately did not follow. Sai would have happily broken the piggish little man once they were out of direct sight. Ah, well... life could not always go his way.

The room beyond the curtain was small, but Sai had been here before, and that did not surprise him. What was new about the chamber was the thick blast plating on the walls and the hovering security droid near the octagonal table and several high-backed chairs. The droid was not subtle; it had a single targeting sensor and a huge barrel as part of its orb-shaped construction.

Sai had no doubt that the droid could use its weapon with a fair amount of skill, but the model was obviously designed to be threatening - - to seem so menacing that it never had to fire its blaster cannon. In a way, he could respect that concept. When he was working, that was exactly how he carried himself. "A gram of terror is worth a kilogram of skill," his mentor used to say.

The single occupant of the room - - a well-dressed Human male - - gestured for him to sit, which he did reluctantly. Sai was the kind of person who prefers to stand whenever possible. Sitting delayed reaction time and burned precious seconds in combat. He knew how to shoot while tumbling from a chair if he had to, but it was never his first choice.

"I know you are a busy man, Mister Kannu, so I'll be brief." The Human's poise and panache spoke of considerable money. But on a world like this, it took more than money to import Denebrillan star silks and rancor leather shoes; it took connections as well. The latter kept Sai interested enough to overlook the man's social gaff in using his "last" name like a Human would.

"I appreciate that. What do you need of me?" He tried not to sound as annoyed as he truly was by having to attend a late-night meeting in such a rancid place.

The Human chuckled, almost as if he could read Sai's thoughts. He gestured around. "You'll have to forgive the surroundings. I call it urban camouflage. This world is in a state of lockdown these days, which means the authorities are busy watching Thaereian activities." The man sipped at a garishly colored cocktail with obvious relish. "Since the Thaereians would never do business in a place like this, establishments of this low caliber

offer excellent concealment."

Sai considered that. He found that while he still disliked the cantina, he could not argue with the logic. He did not know the man's purpose here, but the work he wanted would certainly not be legal. Perhaps there was a good reason for being here, after all.

The Human spread a number of dossiers in front of him on the table. "Your skills as a bounty hunter are beyond reproach, but I am interested in your more... direct abilities. Your confrontational side, as it were. Shall we say - - "

"Shall we say assassin and stop wasting my time?" asked Sai, flatly. "You need an assassin, correct?" He inwardly grimaced at the thought. After that business on Rodia, he was not fond of killing any more. It always got messy, and there was something he was beginning to find distasteful about it all. Maybe he was getting old.

The Human smiled broadly. "Just so. Please look at these. They're all open contracts on people in this system." He gestured to the folders and sat back.

It was all Sai could do not to wince as he leafed through the pages. Eleven lives were sitting in front of him, with images and descriptions, occasionally with names attached. These were lives that someone with a lot of money wanted to bring to an end, so much so that even the most extreme measures were being sanctioned. Reading about how the employer - - nameless as usual - - would accept collateral damage nearly turned his stomach. Sai was no pacifist, but the thought of killing a dozen innocents to take out a single target just seemed wasteful and barbaric.

"I take it you want to act as a middleman on these? Provide me with information on the marks - - for a cut, of course?"

The sharply dressed man grinned widely again and shook his head. "Not at all. I want these people kept safe. I don't want even one of them to expire."

Sai-Ani Kannu blinked. Of every scenario his brains had been generating, this was not among them. It was a full ten seconds before he could reply. When he did, his tone betrayed more surprise than he had intended. "You want what, sir?"

The Human calmly took the dossiers back and placed them in a small box beside his chair. "I want you to work against the assassins that will surely be coming for these contracts. I won't pretend it will be an easy assignment, and it certainly will not be without its risks, but the money is more than adequate." He took a datapad out of the same box and tossed it to Sai languidly. "You'll find the contract there, along with everything you just looked over."

Sai caught the datapad out of reflex, but his minds were still trying to catch up to the concept of what he was being asked to do. This was a first. Still, something about the assignment was very appealing. He nodded mutely, breaking the silence only to ask, "Why?"

The Human shrugged, sipping his drink again. "I'm paying you too much to ask that. I have my reasons. Let's just say a lot of things are coming to a head in this system, and my people want a certain balance of power for political reasons. That's all you need to know, and all that is safe for you to know." For the first time, the Human's gaze turned deadly serious. "Am I understood?"

Sai knew that look well. "Crystal clear, sir. I'll take the assignment." Inwardly, he was relieved. Sure, there would be danger, but he was a professional, and this work suited him right now. Perhaps it was an echo of guilt for the Jedi he had slain, but the idea of protecting people was appealing. It felt right.

"Mister Kannu," the Human said as he was leaving, "I am sure I don't need to tell you to be careful or discreet, but I must insist that none of the targets know of your presence. Just as my people don't want them slain, we also do not want them to know they have been targeted by assassins. We need them to go right on being heroes without looking over their shoulders for yet another threat."

Sai nodded. "Business as usual for them, then. That suit your purposes?"

The Human gave one last broad smile. "Perfectly."